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ABSTRACT

If personal writing empowers students to hear their own voices and to "see themselves as writers," then personal writing has value for basic writing students, whose voices have tended to be silenced and who see themselves as anything but writers. From hearing their voices in writing, and from identifying multiple sources and rhetorical uses of their voices, students may learn to appropriate the thinking processes of academic discourse and social criticism. In reality, however, academic discourse is a style that is identified with the "other" for those students who do not come from college-educated backgrounds. The purpose for integrating writing that is associated with personal voice with the methods and style. of academic discourse is that students can practice the various personal and communal voices they have brought with them and experiment with new variations of voice that will become more appropriate in academic discourse. Practice writings include brainstorming, free-writing, and cluster approaches to their own experiences and imagination, as well as observation and analysis. Some in-class writings are collaborative, allowing for interaction and disagreement over issues to increase awareness of audience. This practice gives them new ways of thinking about their own lives and communities. (Contains 15 references and a sample writing log.) (CR)

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Paper given at CCCC Phoenix,AZ
April 1997

Beyond Basic: Synthesizing the Personal and the Academic

My inquiry into the role of personal voice in academic discourse was sparked by a recent round of that ongoing conversation that appeared when I was also teaching basic writing. The debate between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae in CCC Feb. 95, on whether the personal, authorial voice or the distanced, academic approach to writing is more appropriate to Freshman Composition, seemed to me even more relevant and crucial when applied to the needs of Basic Writing students.

If personal writing empowers students to hear their own voices and to "see themselves as writers" as Elbow puts it, then personal writing has value for Basic Writers, whose voices have tended to be silenced and who see themselves as anything but writers. Similarly, if the critical attitude of academic writing situates students to understand their own positions in historical and cultural contexts, and if that process allows them to "write their way out of a rhetorical situation" as Bartholomae says, then surely Basic Writers need to develop this critical attitude in order to write "against culture," where the culture has failed them. While Elbow and Bartholomae stress the importance of one or the other approach, I would argue that a better approach would combine the strengths of each--to say both/and instead of either/or.

I began by looking at personal voice: What is it and where does it come from? Elbow has defined it as the "sound of the person in the writing": voice as sound

must come from somewhere. We first learn language beginning as infants, in our families. In a dialogue we hear, imitate, and appropriate the language that surrounds us, with the result that, even as adults, we sound like our families. My sons still tell me I sound just like my mother--and they're right! Our community and region shape our language and leave deep imprints on our personal voice. Those of us who have moved around, have heard our speech considered strange, and have picked up elements of new communities in which we spend time. After five years in Florida, the rhythms of my speech changed, and they continue to change over time in other places. But when I return to North Dakota, where I grew up, it doesn't take long before I sound the same as everyone else. (If you've seen the movie "Fargo," it's something like that.)

These discourse communities and others, such as our generation; our individual interests, in sports, music, computers; the media, and reading vocabulary for instance , form our voices. Not just one voice, but a range of voices, depending on where we are, who we're with, voices we can "hear" not only in speech, but in writing. When we listen for voice as sound in writing, we don't hear the rhythm, speed, pitch, and pronunciation that combine to make the sound of our voices. But we retain sentence structure, vocabulary, and perhaps most importantly, our approach to a subject in the way we think. Here it seems to me is the link with Elbow's notion of "real voice;" because when I free-write, the voice is <u>not</u> my speaking voice, but something like stream-of consciousness.

When in our classes, personal voice is explicitly developed in writing, through free-writing for example, the method is often used to focus only on individual, personal feelings or on personal topics and modes, such as narration and description. These approaches have been criticized by David Bartholomae, Mike Rose and others as limiting and limited, as irrelevant to and inappropriate in

academic discourse, and as socially myopic and uncritical. Yet if personal voice originates in the multiple sources and contexts that I have identified-- a list I see as typical rather than complete--then personal voice is not necessarily only individual in its focus. In fact the poet, Galway Kinnell is quoted as making a distinction between the "merely personal" which is individual; and the "truly personal" which reflects back to the community and tradition.

Personal voice, when defined as originating in multiple sources and contexts, leads us to consider a writer as having access to multiple voices, an idea Mary Soliday and Joy Ritchie have discussed. Students, then, are already multi-voiced before they come to us. So I would redefine personal voice to include the social origins of the voice that is called "personal," ie the sound, and to include the multiple dimensions of voice that emerge when students aim writing, like speech, at different audiences in different rhetorical situations. Raising awareness of these multiple voices inherent in personal voice works against the limitations of "my own feelings" and the master narratives that predetermine so many student essays--the story of my traffic accident, someone important in my life, how my grandparents death affected me, and others we've all read.

Having expanded on the possible meanings of personal voice, let's turn to the implications for academic discourse . David Bartholomae has said in "Inventing the University" that when students learn academic discourse they "take on the role--the voice, the persona--of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis and research." This voice, most would say, is <u>not</u> the students' personal voice. Students must pretend, in other words, to know more than they do, to be a part of a discourse community that they are not (yet) a part of. It could be argued that that's the way we learn any discourse, by trying it out, pretending to be more cool, more knowledgeable than we are. When we look at sources of personal voice,

it seems that learning academic discourse is the same process we use to try out new vocabulary from reading, or to participate in any new discourse community until we internalize the new elements and make them our own.

Moreover, it seems to me that there are really two ways to define academic discourse. One is the form, or the style of writing suggested by Bartholomae's definition above: the more formal, impersonal and abstract style, positioned within an ongoing discourse based on research, reading, theory. In a sense his description in "Inventing the University" is about how basic writers assume the style of that persona, although that style isn't all there is to Bartholomae's use of the term academic discourse. The other, more important it seems to me, aspect of academic discourse is method: analysis, interpretation, classification, synthesis, the work of ideas that Mike Rose has described.

When academic discourse --as in mindless adoption of--has been critiqued as "voiceless" and "paternalistic" by expressivists or feminist critics, it's primarily the style, rather than the method that's under attack. Those who do criticize academic methods usually fault them for the same reason as they do personal approaches, (ironically) saying that both tend to replicate rather than challenge existing social structures. These criticisms seem less applicable, however, when we become aware of the social contexts in which both personal voice and academic discourse originate.

Looking then at the process of learning to write academic discourse as adding to the students' existing repertoire of voices, we can build on what we have learned from methods of personal writing and from an awareness of students' personal voices. From "hearing" their voices in writing, and from identifying multiple sources of and multiple rhetorical uses of their voices, students may learn to appropriate the thinking processes of academic discourse and social criticism as well. If personal voice consists of multiple voices, learning the style and conventions of

academic discourse doesn't "erase" voice, as one of my students put it, but becomes one more style to add to their repertoire.

In reality, however, academic discourse is a style that's identified with the "other" for those students who come from non-college educated backgrounds. There may be conflict or resistance to that style, and presumably there might be similar conflict when students encounter ideas, concepts and critical attitudes that violate or threaten those they have previously accepted uncritically. One student's paper on rhetoric and audience was developed with the usual reasons against gun control. When I pointed out that the assignment had been to look at and to analyze the rhetoric, not just repeat it, he confessed that he hadn' t read that part of the assignment. After discussing my suggestions for revision, he revised the paper by breaking down the arguments according to the audience being targeted. In other words, he was able to shift his focus from repeating a familiar rhetoric uncritically to analyzing that rhetoric--a shift in the direction of critical thinking. What may surprise some critics is that many students in a two-year college basic writing class are already capable of seeing their personal experiences in the larger social context, and a few even want to change the world. Maybe we need to trust them, as Freire says, to discover what they need to say first .

Another students began her literacy narrative by saying, "I always loved books. I just couldn't read them very well." and went on to describe how in third grade she still hadn't learned to read. Of her teacher, she said, "Instead of taking the time to teach me how to read, she sent me to a reading class." In a later paper, where the assignment was to respond to one of the readings by comparing it to their own experience, she wrote on "Shame," an excerpt from Dick Gregory's autobiography. She returned to that incident, saying, "I grew to feel ashamed of myself, but I hated [my third grade teacher]. It seems she made fun of me every

chance she got. She would never call on me for anything, unless she was making an example of me, by telling the other children that if they didn't pay attention they would wind up like me, not knowing how to read. " and then "Who was she to judge me?" In this case, the writer is clearly using her personal voice to analyze her own experience, but she also sees her experience as comparable to that of other writers, and like Gregory, she aims her criticism squarely at the offending teacher.

Combining the methods of personal writing and academic discourse can lead to an exciting classroom. The more usual, though, and I would say opposite, method of doing both personal and academic writing is the one implied in some textbooks I've used. They begin with the personal essay and writing process and maybe a word about voice and audience, but without more than a nod at the idea of writing to explore one's own thinking. Then they jump into examples, classification, definition, and argument with a sort of collective sigh of relief that all that messy stuff is over with. No more personal opinions, no more process unless that means an outline and thesis statement; just organize it into five paragraphs and make it sound like academic prose. The actual content becomes optional. In fact, if it says exactly the kind of "conventional wisdom" that Bartholomae indicts, it could be placed in the next edition as a student sample. This method relies on form and appearance of academic discourse, failing not only to cultivate personal voice but failing equally to encourage academic thinking. It needs to be said, however obviously, that this approach develops no such thing as social or any-other-kind of critical thinking. This is the dumbed down approach to the status quo, simplifying everything, making writing seem obvious, predictable, a matter of mere correctness. In attempting to do both the personal and the academic, these textbooks, in effect, do neither very well.

More encouraging are pedagogical approaches I have found that creatively

combine personal and academic methods in such a way that they can work with and against each other.(Halasek)

One example is Anokye's "Oral Connections to Literacy: The Narrative," which describes the use of a series of oral narratives to lead into writing assignments, both narrative and more academic treatments of topics developed first in narrative. Using story as representative of a culture's beliefs, values and world views, Anokye intentionally links writing to the social context of community. Story-telling is used to give students "empowerment and authority" even as it "encourages students to understand and appreciate their classmates' cultural and racial diversity ...and become active participants in the broader conversation of the community through writing"(49). A similar project, described by Creed and Andrews, involves publication of student writing through a community news service. Native Alaskan students write about personal experiences and "traditional tasks," as well as "the clash of the Western and Native cultures in this century"(6). Here, the personal, "unique voice" (8) is affirmed as part of the community, while publication gives a "permanence" to "voices not otherwise heard in the mainstream press" (12) and an audience beyond students' own communities.

Whereas "voice" in these articles emphasizes the personal and the communal, Mary Soliday in "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives," focuses on how personal and communal voices translate into and critique academic discourse. As students read, analyze and write literacy narratives, they "self-translate" as they "cross" from home literacy to academic literacy (512). Describing the multiple contexts of family, school and community, a student describes her "double-voicedness" as a "strength" (518) comparable to being multilingual. The result, Soliday says, is that her student's " 'I' is a writer with many voices..." (519). The student gains authority in academic discourse from

awareness not only of the multiple contexts of personal and community discourse, but of her options as she moves from home culture to school culture. Soliday's approach includes personal and communal meanings of voice, but moves beyond their limitations into academic analysis and social criticism.

With some of these pedagogies in mind, I attempted to make my assignments develop voice as personal, communal, critical, and academic. The writing log is a series of practice writings leading up to an the assigned essay. This one, around a theme of work or employment, uses personal experience and narrative in order to describe, analyze and evaluate a work situation, their own or someone else's. (See handout last page)

The practice writings include brainstorm, free-write and cluster approaches to their own experiences and imagination, as well as to observation and analysis. Similarly, for each reading response, they summarize and give a personal response that calls for interpretation, situating the selection in its historical or social context, or application of ideas to situations that they might be more familiar with. Some in-class writings are collaborative, allowing for interaction and perhaps disagreement over issues to increase awareness of audience. The actual essay is developed from these entries, so they decide which interests them most. Peer review includes response to the content as well as to the writing, to increase awareness of themselves as readers as well as writers.

The resulting essays have included descriptions of teen-age part time jobs, some loved and some hated, descriptions of the employee's experience of a restaurant compared to that of a customer, interviews with family members about their work situations, and descriptions of military life. Others essays told stories: an ethical dilemma when fellow employees were stealing; cases of harassment; several cases of attempted crimes while the student was working. None of which

would I have predicted given the assignment. Some also come to conclusions about the way a job can dominate a person's life, the ways employers and employees manage the pecking order, and how people who need work will accept as necessary, situations that they would never choose, until they may feel their only choice is to quit.

My purpose for integrating writing that is associated with personal voice with the methods, and to a lesser degree the style, of academic discourse is that in the process, students can practice the various personal and communal voices they have brought with them, and in the same non-threatening way, experiment with new variations of voice that will be more appropriate in academic discourse. In addition to practicing personal and academic writing, this process gives them new ways of thinking about, and increasing their critical consciousness of, their own lives and communities. If personal voice means not only the sound of voice in writing but the approach we take as writers to thinking about our topic, then this process could even be considered growth or development as students expand their repertoire of style and method and, as with any other learned discourse, they make it their own. I have quoted Jacqueline Jones Royster's chair speech in class: "I have a range of voices," she says, "and they are all authentic." My voice as a writer changes as I write, read, travel; and I work at creating in my classroom an environment in which students similarly practice and develop their own personal, communal, critical and academic voices.

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English 100
Duym

Writing Log 2

Week 5: Reading Description: The Working Environment

_____2/4 Summarize and respond to Angelou, "Step Forward in the Car, Please" Note especially any similarities and differences between the time and place described in the excerpt and those you are familiar with.

_____In-class write a cluster of a job you have observed and a short explanation of your cluster. [Groups discuss these.]

_____ In-class free-write [description using Natalie Goldberg's prompt "I am looking at... I am not looking at...."]

_____2/6 Summarize and respond to "Brett Hauser: Supermarket Box Boy." Note any features of the work, the people, or the workplace that interest you.

_____Summarize and respond to "Bricklayer's Boy" . What conflicts can you imagine when a parent's and a child's values change as a result of further education and different work experiences?

_____ In-class writing: Cluster your ideal job or work situation and write an explanation of what the perfect work would be for you and why.

_____Personal journal (optional)

Week 6: Writing Description: The Working Environment

_____ 2/11 Interview someone about his or her work situation. Ask questions about what work the person does, about the organization or business, the relationships in the workplace, and anything else that seems important to the worker. Add any comments of your own if you wish.

___ Summarize and respond to "The Hanging." Suppose it was part of your job to do something you believed wrong. How might you handle it?

_____ In class, working with your group, discuss the readings and your writings. List the important factors of a good working situation on one side of the paper, and on the other, list negative aspects of a job. What are the most important features of a positive work environment, and what if any would make a job unacceptable to you or to group members? Writing log due

_____2/13 In the U.S. labor department employment outlooks, which job titles look most appealing to you and why? What requirements would you have to meet to work at such a position?

_____Personal journal (optional)

Second Essay Assignment

The second essay is a descriptive and /or narrative essay. Using the entries in your writing log, develop one or a combination of two or more into an essay dealing with some aspect of work or employment. Your paper should describe a work situation, your own or someone else's, and tell any stories (narrative) that illustrate the conditions of the work. Finally, it should come to some overall conclusions about the nature of this work. You might think about the work itself, relationships among the people there, and whatever else makes this work environment positive, negative, or maybe both. The purpose is to inform the reader about this job or work situation; the approach may be personal or more objective. Try for 2 pages in length, double spaced. Draft for peer review due Thursday 2/13. Final copy due Tuesday 2/18.

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